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Current Issue

Full Content

Epic

Short Story

Life Writing

Poetry

Novel

Mixed Media

Interview

Literary Transit

Book Review

Enlightenment

Bama

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Mettucheri village was bustling with activity it was all about, they said the M.L.A. was expected to visit the village. They had put up a decorated pandal in front of the temple. Everyone, young and old, moved about smiling and looking cheerful. To add to this was the noise from the loudspeakers, blaring out popular cinema songs.

As soon as school was over, little Raju ran straight home. Standing in the doorway, he flung his schoolbag into the house and ran fast towards the temple. All the people were gathered in front of the dais, chattering among themselves. Spotting his mother in the crowd, Raju pushed and shoved his way towards her, and sat down with a thud in her lap.

‘Enda, your bottom shouldn’t touch the ground, eh? said Raju’s mother, Rengamma. ‘Did you shut the door? If the dog enters and goes about licking you and I will have to go hungry tonight?’

‘Mm...I shut it,’ replied Raju hurriedly.

‘Right. Just sit on the ground, will you? My thighs are paining. Studying in the third class, and still asks his mother to carry him on her lap! Are you still a little baby or what? As she talked, Rengamma moved him from her lap and put him down on the ground.

Raju asked, ‘Amma, will we also get a loan-cow?’

‘Yes, yes. Just for this I’ve had to sell so many things to bribe this fellow and that. Instead of just swallowing the bribe money and cheating us, at least now, after such a long time, they are going to give the loan. But tell me, da, if we buy this cow, will you graze it?’

‘All right, I’ll graze it...but...’ Raju hesitated. ‘What about school?’

‘You’ll have to do the grazing after school.’

‘Fine. My classmate Balaraman also has a cow at home. He told me the day before yesterday.’

As they were talking, the M.L.A. arrived in a car. Amidst applause and welcoming shouts from the crowd, he took his seat on the dais. Many people came on to the dais to praise the M.L.A.’s golden heart and his generosity, and garlanded him. When they had all finished, the M.L.A. rose, spoke a few words, and then started calling out names to give out the loans.

When Rengamma’s name was called, she got up and went forward, and Raju went with her. As they were returning, Raju asked in a loud voice, ‘Amma, why haven’t they given anybody any cows yet? What about our cows? When will they give it?’

‘Elai! Is this the place to give a cow? They’ll give only the loan here. It’s up to us to buy a good cow. You’ve got to be told every single thing, otherwise you can’t get to sleep I suppose!’ scolded Rengamma, as she led him back.

From the very next week, loan cows and their calves were tied up everywhere along the streets of Mettucheri. Morning and evening, waves of people came and went with cows, calves and milk cans. Rengamma too had bought a cow big with calf, which looked like it would give birth any day now.

Everyday, when he got back from school, Raju would ask, ‘Amma, why is it our cow alone hasn’t got a calf yet? Do you know that the other people’s cows are all giving milk?’

Raju persisted her about this every day, and she kept saying, ‘Tomorrow.’ She herself was beginning to wonder when it would happen.

When Raju was still in class one, his father had died. His mother was now his whole world. Rengamma herself was quite young, not more than twenty-five. Everyone had tried to persuade her to get married again. In her caste, re-marriage was quite common. Rengamma refused. Her main wish was to bring up Raju well. In fact, this loan cow was also a step towards that goal. She dreamed of saving enough money to help Raju’s future.

That Sunday, an official came to Mettucheroi to brand the loan cows. He looked at each cow and its calf, before branding the ears of the cows. Rengamma had taken her cow there, and Raju had gone along. When the official saw the cow, he asked where the calf was. Rengamma quickly pointed to a calf that was tied to a nearby tree, and said that was her calf. Immediately, Raju interrupted her and said, ‘That calf is not from our cow. That calf belongs to Samy’s cow. Our cow hasn’t had its calf yet.’

When he this, the official refused to brand Rengamma’s cow. He instructed her to send word after the calf was born. Then he

got into his car and left.

Rengamma was furious. When they got home, she scolded Raju severely.

'You just don't know what's what, da. If you'd just kept your big mouth shut, that official would have branded our cow's ear also. Now we have to go and specially request him. Even then, do you think he will come for free? No, another five or ten rupees have to go to him...'

Others who were nearby also scolded Raju. Raju was bewildered.

'Why is everybody scolding me?' he asked. 'Did I tell a lie? I told only the truth, didn't I? It's a fact that our cow hasn't yet had a calf. What, Amma, isn't that a fact, Amma?'

'Oh, stop that "what Amma" talk! You don't know how to get along in this world. Are they going to mint a special medal for you because you spoke the truth? You dolt! I don't know how you're going to survive in life,' Rengamma was weary and frustrated.

'My teacher says we must always tell the truth. She says we must never tell lie. She says lips that tell lies will always be punished,' said Raju.

'Hah! As though you will be rewarded for telling the truth! Look, we are poor people who have to sweat it out for every mouthful of gruel. When it's a battle even to get our daily food, here is this fellow nagging about always telling the truth, never telling a lie. It's all very well for those who fill their bellies with three good meals a day and sit around, to instruct us to tell the truth always and never tell lies. They will understand only if they experience what we are going through,' said Ramayi.

Raju persisted. 'Teacher said whatever it may be, we should never tell a lie. She said Gandhi thatha also said the same thing.'

Rengamma heard this and thought to herself, 'There's something after all in what the boy says. But all this talk of honesty won't help us to survive. Sending him to school seems to be creating the problem, but not sending him to school is wrong too...I wish I knew what to do!'

After four or five days, Rengamma's cow gave birth to a calf. Raju was overjoyed. Even in school he would often be thinking about the calf. He would talk to the teacher and to his classmates about his cow and calf. The moment school was over, instead of dawdling here and there as he used to do earlier, he would go home at once, and set out with his mother for the milking, calf in tow.

One day at school, the boys were sitting and talking about their respective cows. Raju also talked about his cow and calf.

'Our cow gives the most milk among all the cows in the village. Every evening I take my calf for grazing.'

Balaraman, who had been listening to this, said, 'Your cow gives the most milk? Our cow gives the most milk? Our cow gives eight litres a day, did you know?'

'Our cow gives ten litres a day,' countered Raju. This made Balaraman very angry. He shouted in rage, 'Oh, go away! Go to...Your cow is only a loan cow after all. How can it give ten litres? Whom are you trying to tell lies to? Our cow belongs to us outright, did you know?'

'So who says a loan cow won't give that much milk? Go ask anyone. Our cow gives the most milk,' insisted Raju.

Balaraman replied in a mocking tone, 'Whatever it is, your cow is a loan cow, it's not your own. Look at this fellow, boasting about a mere loan cow!'

Raju said nothing, but when he got home, he told his mother what had happened. Rengamma listened to him, and then said, 'This Balaram boy...isn't he the one whose house is on the street near the tank? Be careful not to get into fights or anything with that boy. His father is so rich that he can even buy a hundred cows. They are not from this poor side of the village, you know. In that place, they seem to think a loan cow is something to make fun of... even a young boy like that! What can we do! Anyway, why did you have to go and tell him that our cow gives ten litres? Couldn't you have said some smaller amount?'

'But, Amma, you told me only the other day that it is giving ten litres. They why do you say I should have said something less? I told the truth, Didn't I?'

'If you say the truth about this sort of thing, you'll only make them jealous. If we act like simpletons, everyone will think they can easily take advantage of us.'

Raju was silent. He didn't quite understand what his mother was trying to tell him. He wondered inwardly,

'Could it be wrong to tell the truth? Don't tell lies, they say. Yet they say tell only lies. Amma says unless we tell lies we can't prosper. Teacher says if we tell lies we can't prosper. Amma says if we tell the truth people will cheat us. I just don't understand any of this. It's all so confusing...'

One evening, Raju came home very late from school. Rengamma asked, 'Why are you so late today? I waited and waited for you to come for the milking, and then I had to go by myself.'

Raju sat silently, and did not reply.

'Hey, I'm talking to you! I'm asking you what happened, da. Why are you sitting there as if you're at a funeral or something?'

Raju spoke in a low voice.

'Amma, do snakes eat frogs?'

'What is this? I'm asking you why are you asking this now?'

'Answer me first. Do they eat frogs?'

'Yes, yes, they do. Why...did you see a snake or something?'

'Not today. One day, on our way back from school we saw...'

'Where? Where did you see it?'

'You know where the path curves to the east near the cemetery? We saw two snakes right there.'

'Two snakes! Good God! How big!'

'Big...They were fighting over a frog.'

'How can snakes fight?'

'Really, Amma, they were fighting. Both of them had caught the frog in their mouths and they were tugging at it. That poor frog, Amma, one of its legs was inside one snake's mouth. One snake was pulling one away, the other snake was pulling the other way. That poor frog was crying loudly, Amma.'

'Two snakes fighting over one frog! What a shame!'

'I was hoping someone would come and save that poor frog, Amma.'

'How can anyone save something that is already in the snake's mouth? Poor frog, that was its fate!'

'We thought of throwing stones at the snakes to kill them off, Amma. But we were so scared, we couldn't do it?'

'Why should you be scared? You just have to stand at a safe distance and finish them off with one blow.'

'Aiyayyo! It's supposed to be a sin to kill snakes, Amma, if they are cobras, they will take revenge on us and bite us to death. Because they are divine creatures, that's why. Our teacher told us.'

'Oh, don't talk rubbish! Divine? What divine? Do you know how many cobras people have been killing and flinging aside? When I

was seven months pregnant with you, I myself killed a cobra. You're a pregnant woman, people told me and so you shouldn't kill the snake. Otherwise the child who is born to you will be always flicking its tongue in and out like a snake, they said. All nonsense! Are you going around flicking your tongue in and out?

'Amma, then why did my teacher say that?

'What does she know? She must have read it in some book somewhere, and she is just coming and teaching the same thing. If you look at real life, things will surely be different. Just learn to read and write, da. Do that part of it properly, all right?'

'My teacher has studied so much. How can she be wrong? You have studied nothing at all. Then, how can what you say be correct? I'm going to ask my teacher. What do you say, shall I ask her?'

'Stop all this impertinent talk! Listen to what your elders tell you. Not even three leaves out yet on this seedling, and already he's trying to teach me!'

'But are you older, or is my teacher older? Whom must I listen to, tell me. Quite often you confuse me, Amma.' Rengamma did not reply.

That night, Raju could dream only of snakes. For many days, he couldn't forget about them. Every day on his way to and from school, whenever he came to that spot, he was reminded of the snakes and the frog. Are cobras divine or not? This was the question that exercised his mind all day long.

Rengamma was planning to pay off the loan on the cow, and then repair the leaking roof of their house. Raju had asked for a new schoolbag. Rengamma had told him she would get him one the following week. Raju had gone about telling all his classmates that he was going to get a new bag. After getting the bag, he thought to himself, he must also buy a new pen.

That week, Saturday was a school holiday. As usual, Rengamma took the cow for grazing to a harvested field east of the village, left it there and returned. There would always be ten or twenty cows and buffaloes grazing there. Raju went to school to have his nutritious midday meal, played for a while and came home. Rengamma told him, 'Hey, I've left the cow to graze in the east field. Go and see where it is. Make sure it doesn't stray too far.'

Raju came back and said, 'Amma, you know that part where there are thorny weeds? It's grazing there.'

'Why didn't you bring it over to the place where it is grassy, da?'

'Amma, shall I take the calf for grazing?'

'No. You'll allow it to drink all the milk. Then what will be left for us to milk later? Soon, when it is a little cooler, I'm going to give the cow a bath. Then you can bring the calf. Right now, just collect some grass for it to eat.'

'Amma, then I'm going to bathe the calf. All right? I want to do it, Amma.'

'How can you manage to give her a bath, da? She will frisk and jump around. You won't be able to control her.'

'What is this, Amma! at least let me take the calf now. I'll hold on to the rope all the time while it grazes. If you want, you also come.

'Why doesn't this fellow understand anything the first time it's said? Here I am saying the calf will drink up all the milk, and he's talking all types of thing! Do you want a new schoolbag or not?' Rengamma spoke severely.

'All right, all right, I do want the schoolbag. Then I'll wait and come along with you, and I'll bring the calf.'

When the sun was lower in the sky, Rengamma and Raju went towards the grazing field, along with the calf. Some time later, on their way back home after bathing the cow and calf, Rengamma said, 'Arre, just stand here, hold on to the calf and keep a look out for anyone who may come by. I'll go and pick a couple of ridge gourds from that fence there. There's no money to buy vegetables.'

'Aiyayyao, don't, Amma! Those vegetables belong to someone else. We mustn't steal them. They told us in school also. We mustn't steal, and we mustn't want other people's things,' said Raju.

'Oh, just shut up! You and your school! Just watch out for anyone coming. I'll collect the gourds and come.' Rengamma quickly went to the fence, plucked two of the ridge gourds, and covered them in the folds of her saree.

As for Raju, he was looking around him guiltily all the way home. His mind was bursting with unasked questions. But he was afraid his mother would be angry.

When they got home, Rengamma milked the cow. Raju sat silent on the stone bench near the entrance. Rengamma started peeling and cutting the gourds that she had plucked. Just then old Seeni Patti came by, and asked, 'Where did you get these ridge gourds? They are good and tender. Make a curry with green gram, it will be very nice.'

'I plucked them from Dorasamy Ayya's fence. It's only by such picking and plucking that we can get by. Where do we have the means to go and buy vegetables in a shop? Even buying this ration rice is a big thing for us,' complained Rengamma.

Raju, who had been listening to this, said, 'Patti, tell me, isn't it wrong to steal? We shouldn't take other people's things, isn't that true, Patti?'

'That's what all these big educated people go around saying,' replied Senni Patti. 'But do you think they themselves don't steal?'

Raju was adamant. 'No, they would never ever steal. My teacher herself said so.'

'Just because she says so, does it make it so? I tell you, boy, whether it is the school or the office, nothing moves unless you pay money. You have to place a currency note on every fellow's forehead, otherwise they won't sign the papers. If you want to put your child in school, you have to pay money. Why go so far...to get the loan for the cow, how many bribes your mother had to give to how many people! All this is also dishonesty, da. Nobody wants to talk about that. But here you are preaching a big sermon about plucking a couple of gourds! After all, whom have we harmed by plucking these gourds? What do you know about the acres and acres of land that man owns? You're only a little boy. That's why you go about thinking everything you read in books must be true.'

Raju listened to the old woman, but said nothing. In his mind, though, he came to a decision. 'So it's all right to take from others what we don't have ourselves. Even if that's so, why is it that we alone don't have things? Why does Balaramn, for instance, have so many things? How does that happen? Tomorrow I must ask teacher about this in school.'

Rengaman made the curry and some fresh rice, and served the hot meal to Raju. Though he was hungry, he was somehow uneasy about eating the curry because it had the ridge gourds in it. He told his mother, 'Amma, just give me gruel as usual. I'll just drink that down.'

'Why? Don't tell me you're still thinking about those gourds! Silly fellow! Even at this young age you're so obstinate. Remember that time...when that government official came... How tactlessly you spoke and made everyone angry with you? What a stupid child I've produced!'

'When did I talk like that to an official?'

'You want to know when? Last time there was a cyclone, the government gave money to everyone whose house fell down, remember when they were coming around street by street inspecting and making a list, what did you say?'

'I didn't say anything.'

'What do you mean, you didn't say anything? When they were looking at Veluthayi Akka's house, didn't you behave as if you were some descendent of the honest King Harishchandra? Didn't you say the house didn't fall in the storm but was broken by Veluthayi herself?'

'Yes, I said that. But everyone in our village knew she had broken it, Amma. Earlier that same day, you and Seeni Patti were talking about it. I was there, remember?'

'We were talking about it amongst ourselves. But you went and said it to the government officer! What a problem you created! Everyone is still scolding us for that.'

'But why are they scolding? Did I tell a lie? Even her own son was telling me that she took a shovel broke down the walls.'

'How many times must I tell you, da? Is this a boy she has produced or a stupid ass, that's what people were asking that day. At least from now onwards behave sensibly and learn to get along in life. Will try?' Rengamma's tone was stern, mixed with affection and some disappointment.

Raju ate his meal in silence. He felt he now understood everything, and yet nothing!

'In school they teach you one thing, at home they tell you something else. Amma says we can tell the truth among ourselves, but with outsiders, like government officials, we mustn't. Sometimes we can tell lies, and sometimes we can't. If we don't have something we can take it from someone who has plenty of it. In such a case, it is not called stealing. What Amma says seems to make sense, but then, what about what the teacher says...?' Raju felt utterly confused.

On Monday, Raju went to school. In the evening, the teacher asked them to water plants in the school garden. As the children were doing this, the teacher came and looked around and said, 'You must all do a good job. Imagine this is your own garden at home. Bring plenty of water, and water all the plants really well.'

When they heard this, the children worked even harder. They fetched and carried the heavy buckets and poured the water. The teacher went around and plucked the vegetables, and took them away. Raju was watching this. He told the others, 'Hey, look! When it comes to watering the plants, teacher says we must treat this garden as if it is ours. But when it comes to vegetables, she is taking them away to her house. When they made this garden, they said the vegetables would be used for our midday meal programme. Then isn't teacher cheating?'

Some of the boys who heard this went and reported the whole thing to the teacher. The teacher was furious. She sent for Raju and asked him about it. Raju said, 'Yes teacher. Aren't you telling a lie? Instead of using the vegetables for the children's school meals, you are taking them home. We are the ones who water the plants. Then shouldn't we have the right to pluck the vegetables?'

'Not even three leaves out on this seedling, and he's already defying his teacher! What will happen when grows up!'

As she spoke, she brought her knuckles down hard and repeatedly on Raju's head.

As Raju walked along rubbing his sore head, he thought to himself, 'If the teacher tells a lie, it doesn't seem to count as a lie. If the teacher steals, it is not really supposed to be called stealing. She herself tells lies...she herself cheats...! And she is telling us not to tell lies, not to cheat...'

From that day onwards, Raju became worldly-wise!

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